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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 001270

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [BO](#)
SUBJECT: Prison Cannot Stop Pro-Democratic Activists

Refs: A. MINSK 1222, B. MINSK 1213, C. MINSK 1166, D. 05 MINSK
601, E. MINSK 1248, F. 04 MINSK 1214, G. MINSK 403, H. MINSK 408

Classified By Charge Jonathan Moore for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

1. (C) Former political prisoners and the friends and family of opposition activists currently in jail gathered December 7 at Ambassador's residence. The event marked the second occasion in recent months that the Embassy has hosted a reception for these champions of democracy. The attendees described to Ambassador and Emboffs the poor Belarusian prison conditions and their reengagement in pro-democratic activities. The activists expressed their appreciation of continued U.S. support and gratitude for such Embassy receptions, which gave them a chance to meet with colleagues in a setting other than in a courtroom. End summary.

Prison Conditions Below Par

2. (C) On December 7, Ambassador hosted a reception for released political prisoners and the family of jailed opposition activists. Former MP Nikolai Skrebets, who was released on November 15 after serving 1.5 years for alleged illegal business activities (ref A), described the poor conditions at the Vitba - 3 (Vitebsk oblast) prison facility where he served time with former presidential candidate Aleksandr Kozulin. When Skrebets first arrived at Vitba, he was kept in a small, dark, rat-infested basement cell with "true" criminals for the first four days. His bed was a hard bench on the floor. Food was minimal, showers prohibited, and the guards were apathetic to the prisoners' needs. Skrebets' cell had no ventilation, forcing him to share the same air with tuberculosis-infected convicts. After four days, Skrebets was moved to a regular cell, given fresh clothes, a haircut, a shower, and better food, but he would not call the conditions a great improvement.

A Sage Among Criminals

3. (C) According to Skrebets, he was the only convict in Vitba with an education (until Kozulin's arrival). From day one, the prisoners treated Skrebets and Kozulin with respect. Skrebets passed the time teaching some prisoners how to read and even created a prison newspaper, although small in distribution. The prisoners were not interested in politics but respected Skrebets and Kozulin for their fight against the authorities, whom the prisoners "naturally" hated with a greater passion.

Contact and Visitations Not a Right

¶4. (C) Irina Kozulina, wife of jailed presidential candidate Aleksandr Kozulin, noted that prison authorities only let her visit her husband once in the last two months and prohibited Kozulin from making or taking phone calls (ref B). Skrebets confirmed this, citing his own experience of authorities prohibiting him from making phone calls or seeing his wife. Vyacheslav Dashkevich, father of convicted youth leader Dmitriy Dashkevich, who was sentenced to 18 months on November 1 for running an unregistered organization (ref C), explained to Poloffs that he was required to obtain permission from the head of the Minsk city executive committee, who has repeatedly refused to see him.

¶5. (C) Tatiana Severinets, mother of former Malady Front leader Pavel Severinets -- who was sentenced in 2005 to two years "khamiya" (restricted freedom) for organizing and participating in an unsanctioned demonstration (ref D) -- had similar difficulties. Severinets is allowed unaccompanied leave to his parents' home in Vitebsk, but authorities on multiple instances have refused to grant Severinets this privilege. During the March 2006 presidential elections, authorities accused Severinets of using obscenities, starting a fight with a fellow convict, and theft as a reason to deny him leave. Recently, authorities had refused to grant Severinets an already approved three-day leave to his parents' house. However, after Tatiana threatened to call the press, Severinets was allowed to go to Vitebsk.

Prison Gives Impetus To Fight

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¶6. (C) The former political prisoners who spoke with Ambassador have renewed their pro-democratic activities. Skrebets and his brother plan to help the Belarusian Social Democratic Party in campaigning for Kozulin's release. Irina Kozulin explained her lobbying efforts with the EU to discuss her husband's case at the UN Security Council (ref E). Valeriy Levonevskiy and Aleksander Vasiliev, who in 2004 were sentenced to 2 years in 2004 for slandering Lukashenko and released in July 2005 and May 2006, respectively (ref F), are campaigning for prisoner rights and prison reform. Youth leader of the now dissolved "Zubr" movement and onetime political prisoner Nikita Sasim (ref G) moved from Baranovichi to Minsk to promote civil-society development, recruit the youth in the fight against the Lukashenko regime, and support opposition leader Aleksandr Milinkevich's "For Freedom" movement.

Marinich's "Resurrection" i. Politics

¶7. (C) Former political prisoner Mikhail Marinich, who underwent treatment in Latvia after serving two years in prison for alleged theft (ref H), informed Ambassador of his two primary political goals; reform the electoral code and develop a political-economic policy for the opposition. According to Marinich, in order to have free and fair elections, early voting must be prohibited and all parties should have seats on election commissions and access to mass media. Marinich denied aspirations contesting the next presidential election in 2011, claiming he wanted to work with Milinkevich, who was with him when they met President Bush at an event on the margins of the recent NATO Summit in Riga. Marinich described President Bush's statements at the Summit as further impetus for the opposition to be active and "do something."

Comment

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¶8. (C) The former political prisoners and their families many times throughout the evening expressed appreciation for the

Embassy's continued support /f their fight against the Lukashenko regime. Many indicated that the Ambacsador's receptio., the second with families of repressed political activists and former political prisoners, gave them the opportuni4y to meet with their colleagues in a setting other than the courtroom and meet fellow activists who they had only read about. The dismal stories of prison life made everyone happy that those present were now free, but sad for their colleagues and family members who remain behind bars. However, despite the hardships t(ey face, these activists showed no indication that they were going to give up their fight for a free and democratic Belarus.

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